

Strategies for Navigating Sensitive Topics In and Out of the Classroom

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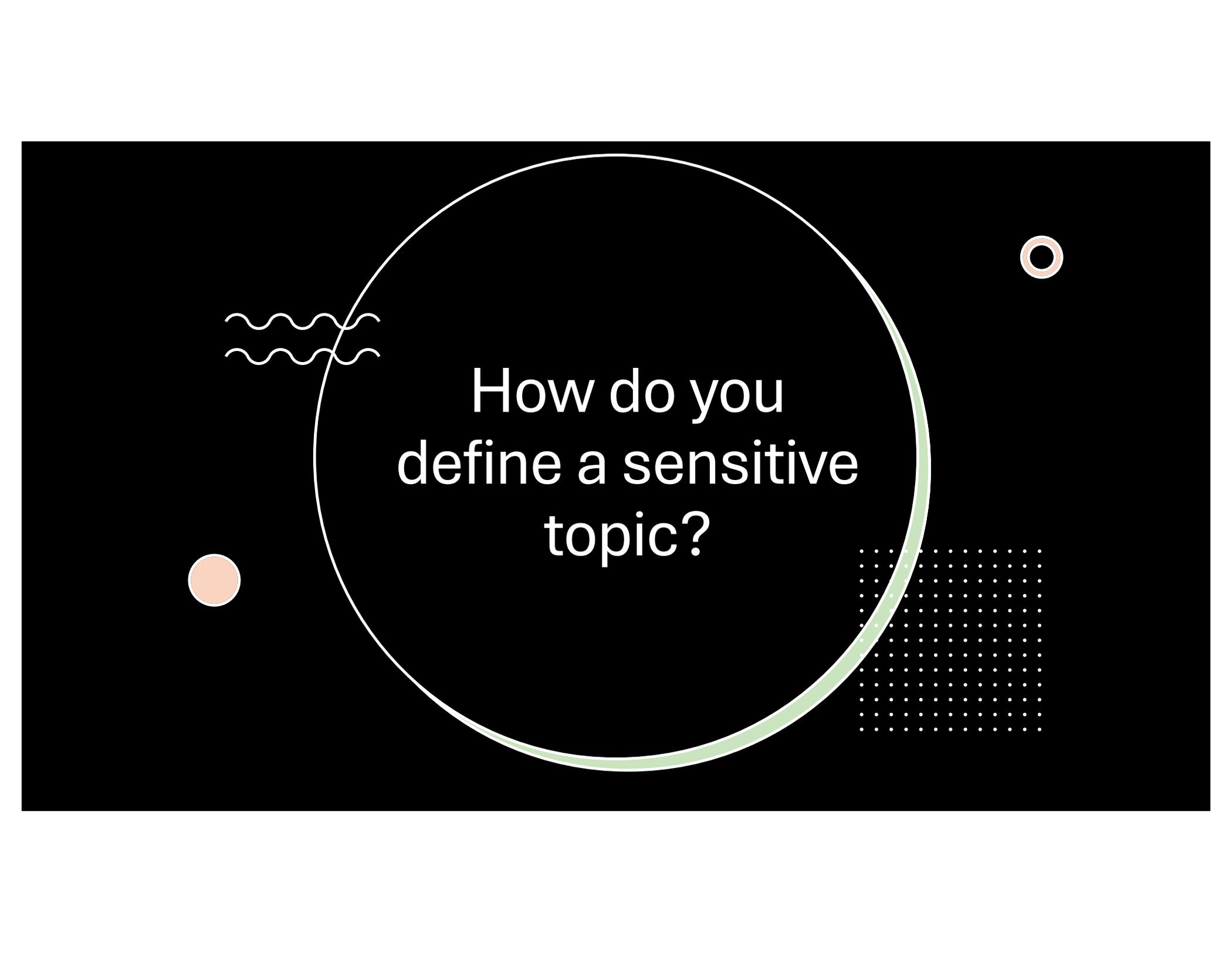
Where we come from as researchers and teachers...

- **Stephany Santos**

- Engineer
- Executive Director of an Institute that believes and advocates for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- Dignity-Affirming Pedagogy/Philosophy

- **David G. Embrick**

- Racism Scholar
- Sociologist
- Humanist



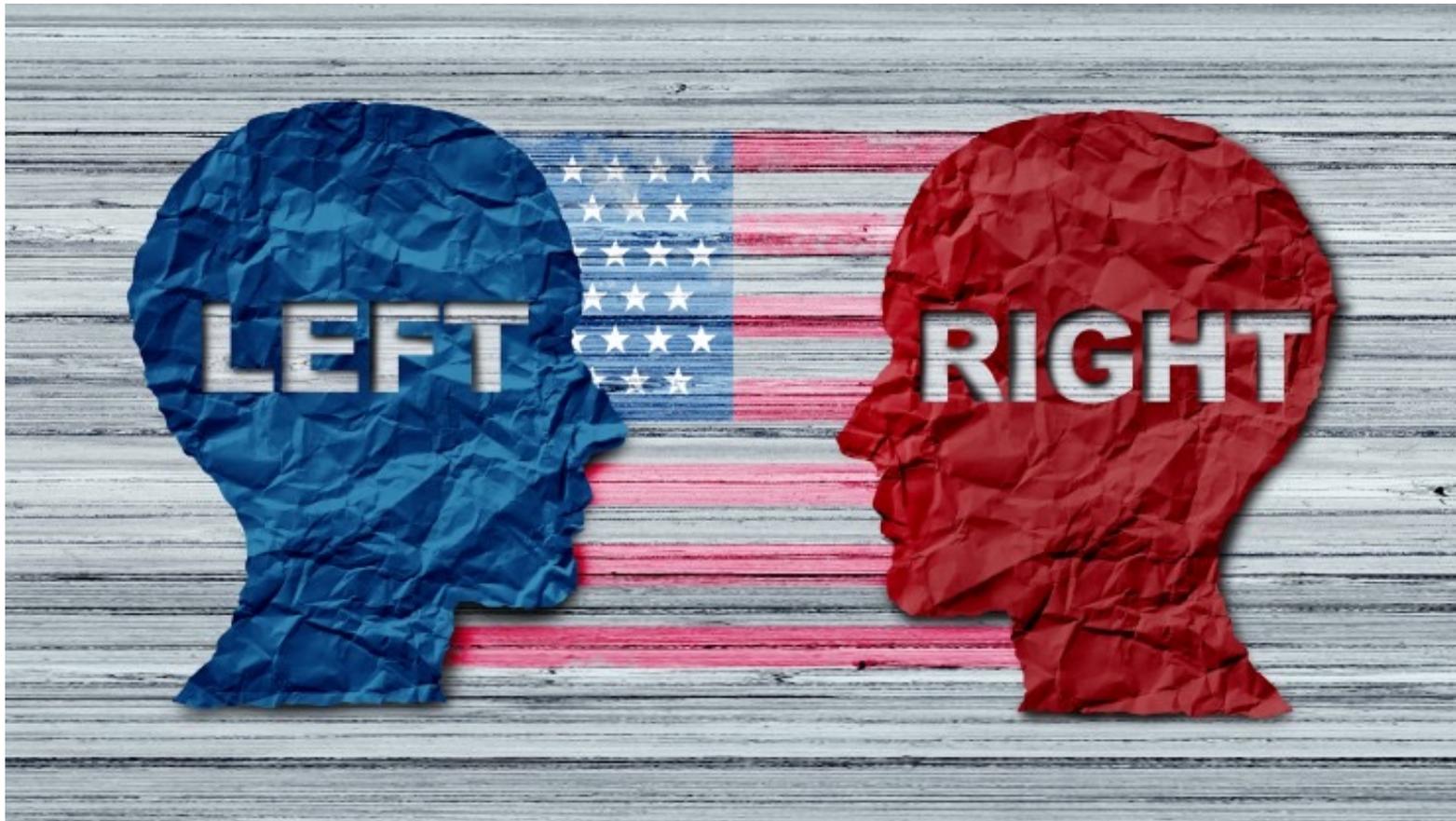
How do you
define a sensitive
topic?



Is it a topic that evokes what one might deem as a **[negative] emotion** (i.e. anger, anxiety, shame)?



Is it a topic that will likely cause **debate**?



Is it a topic that in current political climates, there are **polarized stances** and contexts on the topic?

Is it a topic that you fear if you 'say something wrong' it will **cause harm** [to a student]?





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What do we mean by sensitive **topics**?

Race/Ethnicity/Racism/Ethnic Oppressions

Gender

Sexual Orientation

Class/Labor

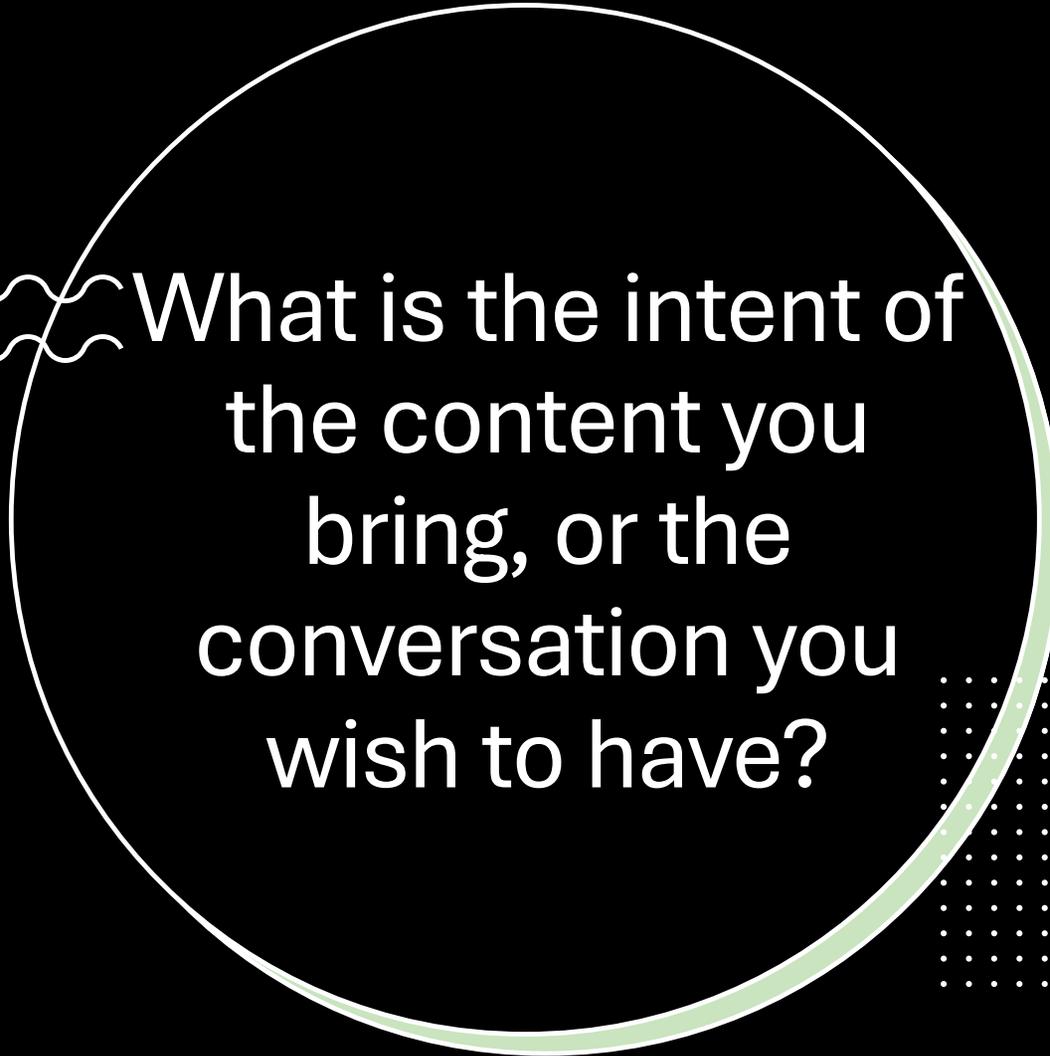
Immigration

War/Genocide/Ethnic Cleansing

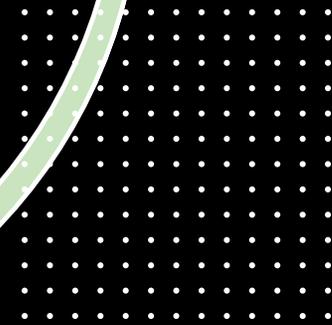
Politics (e.g., the current climate)

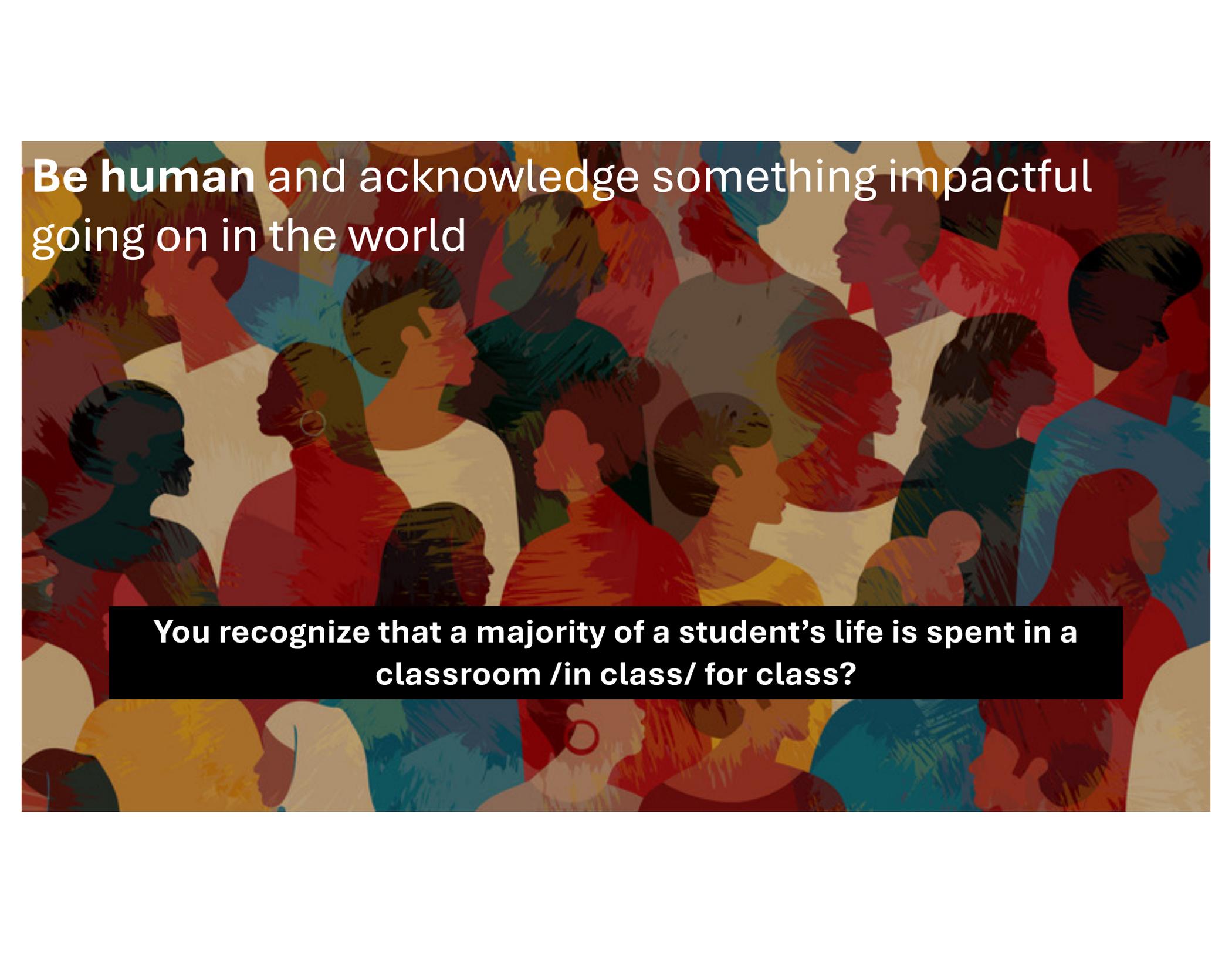
The topics are not the only issue...

- Students (and their friends, family, coworkers, colleagues...) may be personally affected
- Students do not come to the university as a blank slate...their troubles may be cumulative
- Students exist both within and outside of the university
- At the end the day, we are human.



What is the intent of
the content you
bring, or the
conversation you
wish to have?

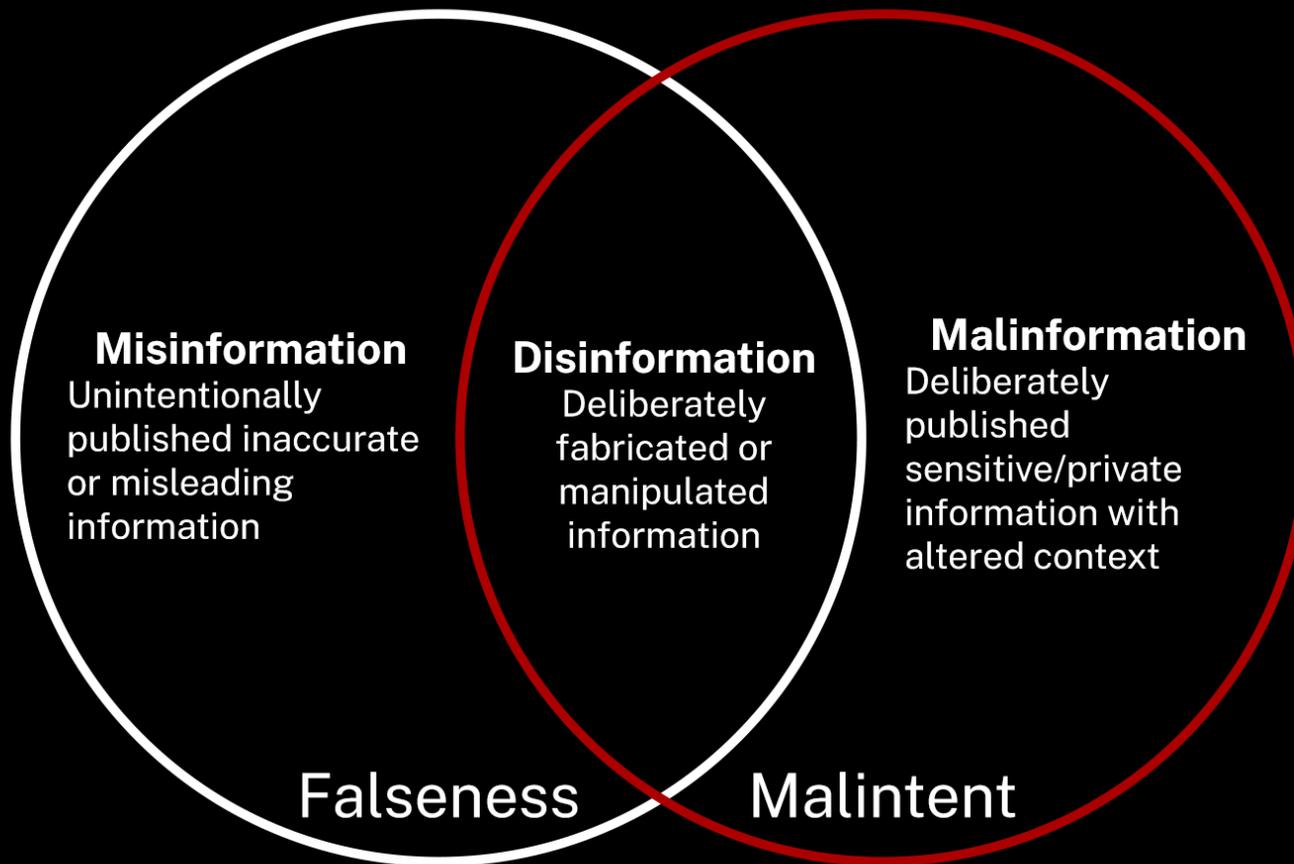




**Be human and acknowledge something impactful
going on in the world**

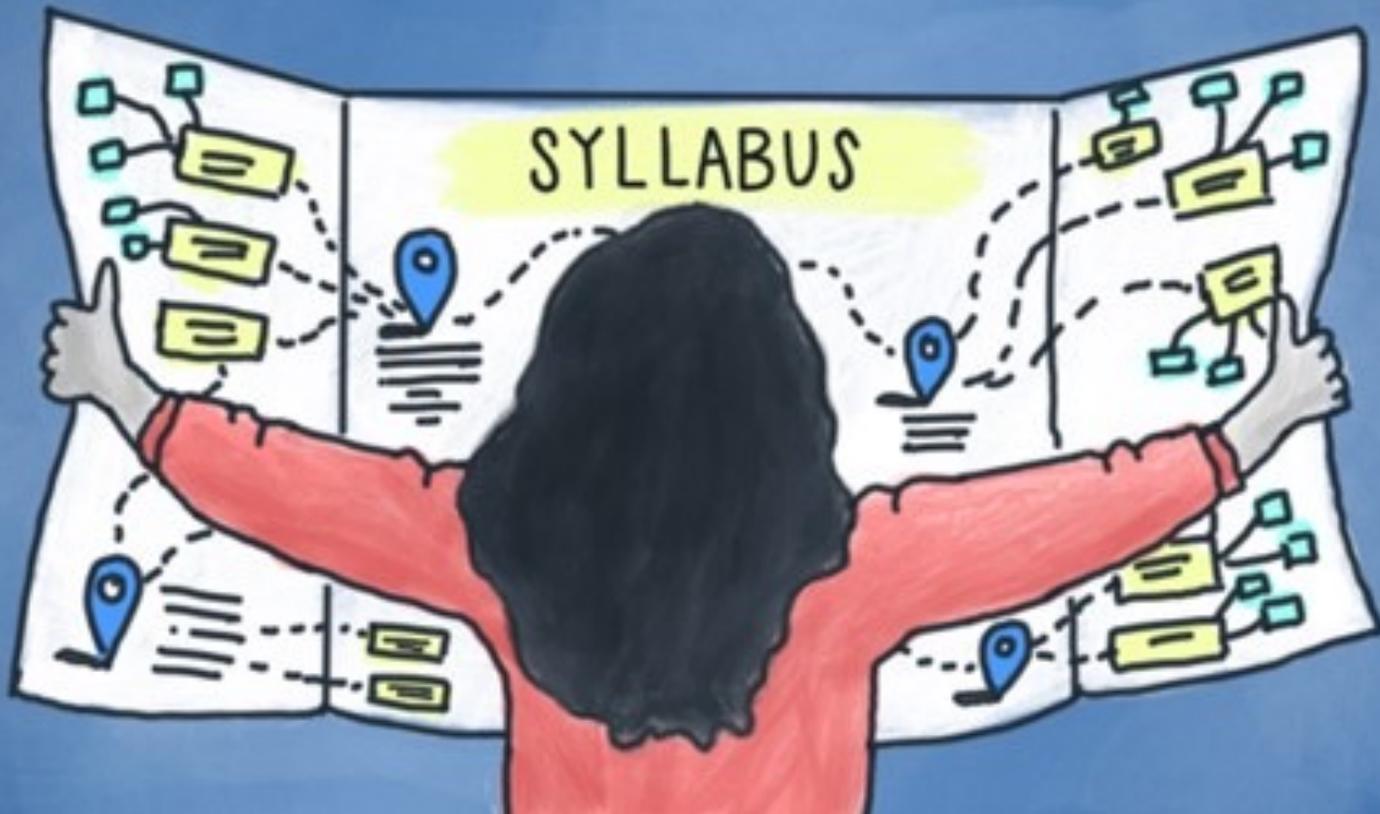
**You recognize that a majority of a student's life is spent in a
classroom /in class/ for class?**

You acknowledge there is a lot of misinformation or disinformation in the world



Your intent is to correct, clarify, or connect students to data, evidence, or perspectives

You can connect and contextualize topics in your syllabus or learning objectives to ‘sensitive topics’



You hope to build capacity, skill or empathy in students by the nature of the discussion

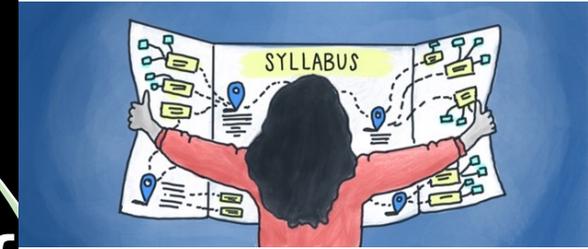


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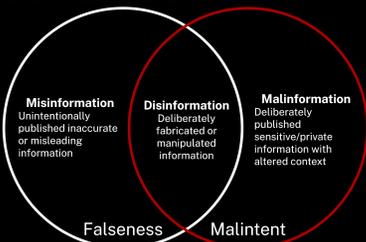
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Establish Clear Community Norms Early

Consider including in your syllabus clear community norms of engagement

Begin your course by going over these norms and also consider co-creating discussion norms with students (e.g., active listening, confidentiality, interrupting constructively).

- When students help set expectations, they are more invested in upholding them.
- Revisit norms periodically as discussions evolve.

Frame Sensitive Topics as Complex, Not Personal

01

Let students know that academic exploration of issues (e.g., race, gender, politics) is not an endorsement of any single viewpoint.

02

Emphasize critical thinking and evidence-based reasoning over “right vs. wrong.”

- Encourage students to distinguish *ideas* from *identities*.

Use Real-World Context and Shared Inquiry

- Ground conversations in texts, case studies, historical context, and evidence, not only abstract opinion.
 - Shared materials help anchor discussions to a common reference point.

Use Structured Dialogue Techniques

Within the context of critical thinking and evidence-based reasoning, think about alternative learning methods to traditional classroom practices such as:

- Think-pair-share
- Socratic seminars
- Fishbowl discussions
- Restorative circles

*These formats give every student space to speak and help reduce anxiety around open debate.

Build in Reflective Practices

Consider integrating short reflection prompts (written or verbal) before and/or after sensitive discussions.

Depending on how much time you allocate for reflection, consider small group interactions.



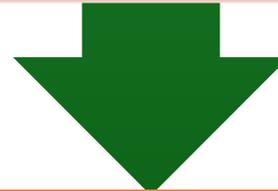
Generally, reflection helps students process emotional reactions and articulate thoughts more clearly.

Teach and Model Civil Discourse Skills

- Civil discourse is hard.
 - There are literature on how “civility” has historically (and currently) been used to curtail conversation
- That said, we can guidance on active listening, acknowledging disagreement respectfully, and asking clarifying questions.
 - Refer to earlier slide on establishing community norms early.
 - It is super important that faculty model this behavior consistently, especially when challenged.

Normalize Discomfort as Part of Learning

But also note that discomfort can be constructive.



Provide Multiple Avenues for Engagement

- Think about alternatives such as discussion boards, anonymous submissions, reflective journals, or small group dialogues.

Foster a Culture of Inclusive Curiosity

Emphasize

Emphasize questioning over debating to win.

- Promote learning as a shared journey, not a contest.

Reward

Reward students for thoughtful inquiry, even if they are wrestling with uncertainty.

- Never put down students for their inquiry(ies), even if they are outrageous.

Conduct Mid-Semester Feedback Loops

- Solicit anonymous student feedback about the classroom climate and discussion dynamics.
 - This allows faculty to adjust approaches before tensions escalate.



How Can Universities Help Faculty in the Classroom?



Equip Faculty with Ongoing Training

- Universities can offer workshops on **intercultural competence**, **facilitating difficult dialogues**, **implicit bias**, and **trauma-informed pedagogy**.
 - Professional development helps faculty feel confident and prepared.



Create Institutional Spaces for Dialogue Beyond the Classroom

- Universities can sponsor **dialogue salons, intergroup dialogues, speaker series, and facilitated forums** that bring together students, faculty, and staff.
 - Cross-campus partnerships encourage perspectives that stretch beyond one's academic silo



Provide Access to Support Resources

- 
- Make clear what counseling, mediation, and academic support resources are available to students and faculty.
 - Having structured support systems reduces the emotional burden during challenging conversations.



Establish Principles for Academic Freedom and Respect

- Clarify institutional commitments to both **free inquiry** and **mutual respect**.
 - Policies that balance academic freedom with community care signal that meaningful dialogue is a shared priority.

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